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Being a climber: Progressive lead coaching

Participants often learn effectively through authentic first hand experiences rich in immediate meaning where the process and content are integrated and they can gain an appreciation of the whole from an early stage. An important aspect of these experiences is that learners exercise as much power over their learning as we can facilitate whilst fulfilling our duty of care.

Lead climbing is often taught at a ratio of 1:2, why is this and what are we concerned about that means we have to be *'just there'*? It seems that we, as mountain professionals can be quick to place novice climbers into scary and consequential situations where we are drawn into close management typically involving technical solutions. Teaching in this way can serve to place power predominantly in the hands of the coach, reducing participant involvement and the room for discovery learning. If our concern is that our participants are likely to fall off then perhaps easier angled, less consequential terrain could allow us to step back a little more, facilitating greater lead climber autonomy?

Insert 1 image: Crag image

In response to these observations we decided to explore alternative approaches which might provide a gentler progression for our novice climbers and began searching for venues. These venues needed to offer a range of angles and route lengths from short (5 meters) easy scrambles to longer single pitch scrambles up to grade 3 in addition to graded climbs. Further to offering easy ground to move over the scrambles needed to be short at first while also affording a range of gear placements to allow plenty of practice opportunities. The terrain would be easily navigable without a rope allowing the novice leader to focus on the new part, learning the ropes.

Insert 3 Images: Lead climb demonstration 1, lead climb demonstration, belay building having led the route.

To help tee off our fledgling climbers we facilitated an experience of the whole lead climbing process with a concise demonstration of tying on, setting up the belayer, leading and placing a few runners then belay building at the top. Upon arriving at the top we invited everyone to scramble alongside us so they could observe the process of placing runners and belay building in situ. (1) After a review of what they had seen the climbers were ready for their first lead.

1. We were also able to demonstrate the importance of clipping from the hip by asking the students to reach up and 'fall' (climb down) imagining they fell just before clipping.

Insert 1 image: first lead climb begins

2. Applying the notion, 'less is more' i.e. the least input the better as this allows learners to work from what they know affording room for exploration. For example you might limit your demonstration to belay building leaving them to fill the gaps around belaying a lead climber and leading the route. If participants happen to demonstrate good practice this can be celebrated in the moment,

The low consequence venue allowed us to set the

where this doesn't occur it may be addressed on the next route where appropriate.

learners off and experience their first lead with a high degree of ownership over their experience. It was not long before the climbing pairs had swapped roles, and were beginning to peer coach.(2)

As they moved on to their next route their second was asked to weight the system either from the base of the route by pulling the rope or through close supervision higher up. This provided task-intrinsic (sensory) feedback on the belay set up and process. Once they had begun to gain fluency and accuracy the leaders progressed to steeper, longer (but still ungraded) routes.

Insert 2 images here: competent lead climber on day 1, competent belaying on day 1.

During the afternoon of the first day participants are often ready to select more challenging terrain and lead this under minimal supervision, looking and feeling like 'climbers'. A guiding principle in helping climbers decide whether they should progress to more consequential ground is a shared (between the climber and coach) sense of readiness. For example, the performance becomes relatively automatic and therefore ready to cope with increased stress; mastery before fear.

We looked to see that on the next day of the programme the participants were able to reproduce the previously learnt skills, with minimal coach input and experiment with the amount of routes they were able to complete in a given time and place before increasing levels of technical difficulty or environmental consequence.

Reflections: *Some good things happen when we reduce the angle...*

As environmental consequence decreases the technical nature of the task can remain 'real' whilst offering increased opportunities for learner autonomy. Despite using relatively 'tame' terrain skills are gained with immediate satisfaction found in the task, together with preparation for later usefulness. This approach affords a wider range of teaching ratios, in the case of this article group sizes are typically 8:1.

The principles described here have been applied to abseiling with great success, look out for a future article on G.S.E.C. descent!

Biographies



Richard Ensoll

AMI member and holder of the WMCI Richard Ensoll is a senior lecturer at the University of Cumbria involved in teaching delivery in the Outdoor Studies department. He has been involved in outdoor learning and adventurous journeying for over 30 years and is currently fascinated by ways in which our practice can be enhanced through slow (or more rhythmical) practices.

Danny image in folder.

Danny is a lecturer in Outdoor Education at the University of Cumbria. He has worked extensively as an outdoor educator and has been involved in the coaching of mountaineering techniques, paddle sports and sailing for over 20 years. Danny can be found on the mountains, crags, rivers and lakes or at daniel.towers@cumbria.ac.uk